

## Background

Research of homeless communities has historically stressed "the digital divide": comprised of government reports, comparing socioeconomic classes with access to available technology

In the 1990's, research started to involve the social sciences and focused on the information-seeking behavior of understudied populations

Currently, research has shifted to the power dynamics between homeless patrons and the library, placing library services, policies, and our understanding of homelessness into question



## Recognizing Homelessness

Defining homelessness is complex and is the result of many factors and systemic barriers: economic hardship, domestic violence, substance dependency, mental illness, physical challenges, racism and discrimination

## Methods

### Purpose

To investigate why libraries provide irregular services to patrons experiencing homelessness and how reframing our understanding of these users can influence policies

### Databases

Library & Information Science Abstracts (LISA); Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA); ERIC (ProQuest); ACM Digital Library; Academic Search Complete; SCOPUS; Web of Science

### Number of Articles

Total of 42 articles identified

### Analysis

5 themes identified surrounding the experiences of homeless patrons and library staff, as well as policies

## Findings



### Services & Interactions

Homeless patrons: prefer face-to-face interactions with a written record; understand the limitations of services

Library staff: "under the radar" types of support, i.e. private telephones or contacting service providers

When librarians are part of the solution, it tends to be without training; lack of administrative commitment and funding



### Partnership with Shelters

Librarians act without connections to agencies, resulting in a duplication of efforts or misleading reference interviews

Partnerships as a free initiative: networking with shelters; hiring service workers; and serving on advisory boards

Hesitancy to reach out: library staff lack support and shelter staff are overworked



### Connection to ICT

Homeless patrons use ICT; do not see themselves "information poor" or restricted to digital information

Communities are suffering from information overload: overabundance of printed resources from service providers

Disarray of printed material symbolizes the complexity of finding support



### Psychosocial Needs

The library can play a vital role in fulfilling:

**Immediate Needs:** shelter occupancy, transitional housing, food banks, employment, medical info etc.

**Higher-Level Needs:** escapism, self-confidence, identity MGMT, and normalcy

Visiting the library is a stabilizing event where someone's presence is legitimized



### Policy as Barriers

- I - Policies establish the practices and boundaries of acceptable behavior
- II - The library exists as a designated or limited public forum, leading to poverty profiling
- III - Commonly enforces middle-class expectations of behavior

*Kreimer v. Bureau of Police of Morristown (1992)*

The library exists as a limited public forum

*Armstrong v. District of Columbia Public Library (2001)*

Despite vague policies, a patron can be denied entry

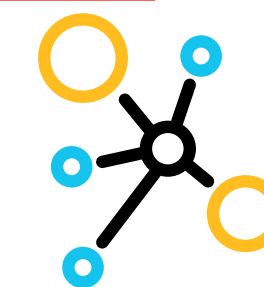
*Neinast v. Board of Trustees of Columbus Metropolitan Library (2001)*

If appearance falls within the policy, patron can be expelled

## Innovative Libraries

### San Francisco Public Library

- ▶ Hosting monthly resource fairs to provide eyeglasses, vaccines, shoes, and haircuts
- ▶ Partnering with a non-profit company that provides free mobile shower services outside of the building



### The Free Library of Philadelphia

- ▶ Non-profit agencies teamed with library personnel to train and hire formerly homeless individuals
- ▶ Engaging with homeless patrons and encouraging to access social assistance and join the workforce

### Dallas Public Library

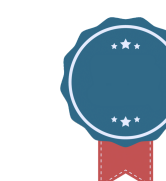
- ▶ Coffee and Conversation - homeless patrons gather to express why they come to the library
- ▶ Allows library personnel to brainstorm and develop new services and programs

### Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System

- ▶ Permits homeless patrons to use shelter addresses when applying for a library card and offers free GED classes for the unemployed or underemployed

## Conclusion

Homeless patrons cohabit the library space within tense social and political contexts. Libraries are often ill-equipped to serve these patrons as they typically lack training initiatives, administrative backing, or partnerships with local service agencies. Libraries must reevaluate these user groups, encourage equal access to resources, and embrace the tenet of providing information for all



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**\*Bibliography available upon request**